

**Statement of John A. Boehner
Chairman
Committee on Education and the Workforce
Hearing on
“School Choice in the District of Columbia: Opening Doors for Parents and
Students”**

Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Waxman, and fellow colleagues, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on an issue of great importance to me. I would like to commend my colleague, Chairman Davis, for his work on this issue and for holding this hearing.

I am here today because I believe that all children, regardless of their economic background, deserve a safe and productive learning environment. I believe that we ought to trust parents to make the best decisions about their children’s education. I believe that the current system in the District of Columbia is robbing both parents and children of the right to a quality education. And I believe that competition in the education system creates a culture of achievement that will improve the quality of every student’s academic experience.

I refuse to accept the notion that some children are unable to learn, a notion that the President has called “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” The problems in the D.C. school system are not related to insufficient funding: we have continued to spend more and get less. The District of Columbia spends \$9,650 per pupil, among the highest in the nation, as opposed to the national average of only \$6,627. Spending more is not the solution. If it were, Washington families would have the best available. The solution is to give parents the kinds of freedom they need to find the best education possible for their

children, to increase competition, and to improve the overall academic climate of the city, so that all schools are forced to improve.

Students and parents in Washington, D.C. have been held captive by one of the most troubled school districts in the nation. Decades of neglect have left D.C. residents with run-down facilities, dispirited educators, violence, and a bureaucracy that serves to block all meaningful reform. Despite funding increases that have tripled spending on education in the nation's capital, national indicators such as the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) continue to reflect poor academic achievement among D.C. public school students. This lack of progress stands in stark contrast to the District's per-pupil expenditures, which are among the highest in the nation. Worse, the District's students continue to score the lowest average on the NAEP with over 70% of its fourth graders scoring at or below basic proficiency on reading and only 53% of tenth grade students scoring at or above the basic reading level in 2000. Additionally, the District's students ranked last in the nation on the SAT and ACT in 2001 and in 2002 had the second-worst attendance record in the country. No one should think that this is good enough. There are no excuses available for this, and we cannot continue to turn a blind eye and fund a public school system that is proving itself to be immune to progress.

President Bush is also a firm believer that parents should have the right to make decisions about their children's education. Recognizing that a major commitment to change is necessary, he requested \$75 million in his FY2004 budget proposal to initiate a

pilot school choice program, and asked us, his friends and supporters in Congress, to use this money to improve the educational plight of D.C.'s children and families.

In response to the President, my colleague, Chairman Davis, and I have recently introduced the D.C. Parental Choice Incentive Act of 2003, a bill that will give hope to thousands of D.C. parents by providing scholarships of up to \$7,500 per student to attend the private school of their choice in D.C. Thanks to the President's budget request, these much-needed scholarships will be paid for out of new money, so that the public schools are not drained of any funds. In fact, the increased competition will improve the quality of education for children who get these scholarships as well as those that choose to stay in the public schools. This bill will offer a real, tangible escape for students who are trapped in the under-performing public schools by empowering parents, promoting competition, and supporting equal access to a quality education.

School choice empowers parents by allowing them to have input in their child's education. School choice shows parents that we trust them, not the bureaucrats or administrators, to make the best decisions about their children's education.

Unfortunately, the current system only empowers parents who have the means to either move to a better school system or to afford a private education. This bill will give parents a choice, and make sure that, regardless of their decision, their children have a quality public or private school education.

School choice has been proven to strengthen public schools by promoting competition within the educational system. Competition leads to higher expectations and improved academic achievement, as illustrated by the school choice program in the state of Florida. Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research conducted a study which found that schools labeled failing whose students were given scholarships to attend alternative schools made twice the gains in test scores as schools without competition. Similarly, a study conducted by Caroline Hoxby of the school choice program in Milwaukee demonstrated that public schools facing more competition from school choice improved at a faster rate than schools facing little or no competition. By showing parents and their children that they have options, and that they don't have to settle for the sub-standard services they have been receiving, we are optimistic that this bill will prod D.C. to improve their quality of education so that no child will be trapped in a low performing school.

No lawmaker with a conscience should be able to sit idly by, watching the children of the District of Columbia confined to a future of low expectations. We have a unique opportunity, right now, to improve the lives of thousands of our citizens. We cannot afford to leave this generation in underperforming schools while we conduct research and studies on how best to fix the systemic problems facing the public education system in Washington, D.C. With the bill that my colleague Mr. Davis and I have introduced, we will empower parents with the right to make the decisions about their children's education, and give them options immediately. I urge each of you to support

this bill and provide D.C. parents with choices, D.C. children with opportunities and D.C. schools with hope.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I conclude my remarks and would be happy to answer your questions.